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# Preservice Teachers' Professional Development in a Community of Practice Summer Literacy Camp for Children At-Risk: A Sociocultural Perspective

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## Preservice Teachers' Professional Development in a Community of Practice Summer Literacy Camp for Children At-Risk: A Sociocultural Perspective

### Abstract

This inquiry applied an innovative sociocultural framework to examine transformations in preservice teachers' professional development as they worked with children at-risk in a summer literacy camp. The camp incorporated a community of practice model in which teams of master's and doctoral students mentored small groups of preservice teachers. The study examined preservice teachers' learning following Rogoff's (1995, 1997) notions of the personal, interpersonal, and community planes of analysis. The research also employed a postmodernist crystallization imagery to capture multiple perspectives on the preservice teachers' growth. The study assigns importance to the contextual dimensions in which learning takes place, and emphasizes that learning is nourished by interactions with others.

### Keywords

Children At-Risk, Community of Practice, Personal Interpersonal and Community Planes of Analysis, Sociocultural Theories, and Summer Literacy Camp

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## **Preservice Teachers' Professional Development in a Community of Practice Summer Literacy Camp for Children At-Risk: A Sociocultural Perspective**

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Many children who attend high poverty elementary schools make significant reading gains during the school year (Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson, 1997; David & Pelavin, 1978; Heyns, 1978; Murane, 1975). However, during summer vacation children from high poverty schools often experience decreases in reading achievement, while children from more affluent schools usually improve (Schacter, 2001). This phenomenon makes sense when we consider that when schools are closed, parents with limited monetary resources may find it difficult to provide educational opportunities for their children, such as visits to bookstores and libraries, access to technology and literature in the home, and enrollment in summer literacy programs (Foster, 2002; Neuman, Celano, Greco, & Shue, 2001). Schema theory, which posits that what readers bring to the text is as important as the text itself helps explain how participation in diverse experiences has the potential to expand children's background knowledge. In addition, a transactional socio-psycholinguistic perspective, which views reading as an interactive transaction between the reader and the text helps explain how engagements with literature have the potential to expand children's language and literacy development (Goodman, 1994; Rumelhart, 1994).

As a professor who works during the school year with preservice teachers and children at-risk, in high poverty elementary schools. I recognized a need to expand opportunities for preservice teachers to learn how to work effectively with children in low-socioeconomic learning environments. Recently, as part of my summer teaching requirements, I was scheduled to teach a graduate and an undergraduate reading course.

Therefore, I devised a plan where I formed collaborative teams of preservice teachers and master's and doctoral students to offer a summer literacy camp for 60 at-risk kindergarten to fourth grade children. The study described here focuses on transformations in the preservice teachers' professional development as they participated in camp activities. I believe the education of future elementary teachers is an important place to begin to expand literacy learning opportunities for children at-risk<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Context, Philosophy, Content, and Structure of the Summer Camp**

In conjunction with a required advanced reading course for preservice teachers, the 10-week camp met one evening a week in a low-income Charter School located on the campus of a large urban southeastern university. A comprehensive, interactive view of literacy guided the philosophical perspective for the camp's tutoring sessions. This perspective values multiple ways of learning and considers reading to be a cognitive process in which meaning results from interactions between the reader and the text (Gipe, 2006; Rosenblatt, 1994). A comprehensive interactive stance also honors children's personal talents and unique differences (Gardner, 1999; Lipson, & Wixson, 1991).

Accordingly, I structured the course to familiarize preservice teachers with assessments designed to pinpoint children's individual reading and writing strengths, interests, and instructional needs. Course content also introduced the preservice teachers to strategies and best practices designed to foster children's decoding and word recognition competence, reading comprehension, and writing proficiencies. An additional component of the course required the preservice teachers to make thoughtful decisions about instruction as they tutored small groups of children (the same children throughout the semester).

During the first hour of our sessions (5 - 6 pm), I met with the preservice teachers and master's and doctoral students to offer lectures, present demonstration lessons, and coordinate seminar discussions on topics that pertained to camp activities. Children attended the camp from 6 - 8 pm in the evening. The majority attended the Charter School. However, some were from near-by schools, and a few children came from outside the district. Parents residing out of the area learned about the camp through word of mouth, and they traveled great distances by public transportation so their children could participate. Many parents participated with their children during the tutoring sessions. They also gathered in the school cafeteria to visit with other parents, and communicated with their child's tutor before and after each session.

### **The Preservice Teachers and Their Lessons**

The 42 preservice teachers, whose ages ranged from 20 to 45, were either in the 3rd or 4th year of their elementary teacher education program. Their instructional sessions were based on the camp's broadly based theme, "We Are the World." Typically, the preservice teachers began their instruction with dialogue journal activities designed to enhance children's informal writing abilities. Then, each small group engaged in a shared

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<sup>1</sup> The term "at-risk" refers to children who are likely to fail in school or in life because of their life's social circumstances. Poverty is generally considered a major at-risk factor (Pellino, 2006, p. 1).

book experience with quality literature. The preservice teachers also supported children's reading development with visual literacy and comprehension strategies based upon each child's instructional needs (e.g., connecting illustrations to text content, making inferences and predictions, finding the main idea of a passage, attaching new information to known, analyzing characters' goals and actions, and determining story themes).

In every lesson, the preservice teachers linked fiction with informational sources (e.g., encyclopedias, content textbooks, internet websites, diagrams, charts, maps, and photographs). They also helped children enter new and unusual words in complete sentences in personal dictionaries and keep a log of books heard and read. To culminate the sessions, the preservice teachers collaborated with children in creative arts engagements that supported the camp's theme, "We Are the World" (e.g., murals, creative books, informal dramatic arts enactments, dioramas, rhythm band activities, vocal music, poetry, dance, and movement).

As part of course requirements, the preservice teachers e-mailed weekly reflections to me. In addition, they also completed an exit survey and participated in an end-of semester focus group session designed to capture their reflections about camp experiences<sup>2</sup> (see Appendix A for the exit survey questions).

### **Master's and Doctoral Student Mentors in a Community of Practice**

Fifteen master's degree students who received graduate credit and 7 doctoral research assistants, who volunteered their time, also participated in the camp. The 22 master's and doctoral students were all experienced teachers. Seven teams comprised of a doctoral student and two or three master's degree students each mentored a group of six preservice teachers (the same preservice teachers throughout the semester). I had a hunch that incorporating this type of expert-novice community of practice model might help facilitate the preservice teachers' professional expertise. Communities of practice are social units that have a common purpose. Members interact regularly, share common beliefs and vocabulary, and learn from one another as they engage in mutual activities (Smith, 2005). As Lave and Wenger (1991) note, communities of practice are found everywhere, and include small or large groups in which "the social relations of apprentices within a community change through their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices' understanding and knowledge skills develop" (p. 94). Although tensions and conflicts can occur within a community of practice (Wenger, 2006), considerable research indicates that despite the potential for dysfunctional behavior such communities provide opportunities for members to grow professionally (Schlager & Fusco, 2003). Yet, communities of practice models are often ignored in teacher education (Moore, 2006), although research indicates they offer rich contexts for learning and development (Goos & Bennison, 2002; Pressick-Kilborn & Walker, 2004). In fact, many educational scholars believe that rather than attempt to develop teacher proof curricula, schools of education should foster such communities (Rueda, 1998).

The teams of graduate student mentors and preservice teachers discussed topics such as how to choose quality children's literature, plan for differentiated instruction, and interpret assessment data. The graduate student mentors also observed the preservice teachers' lessons and made extensive field notes, which they shared with the preservice

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<sup>2</sup>In this manuscript the terms camp, tutoring, and work are used synonymously.

teachers. In addition, they provided guidance about group management issues, and encouraged the preservice teachers to reflect about their work. They communicated weekly with one another and with the preservice teachers, and me, through group meetings, telephone, and e-mail conversations.

### **Rationale for Focusing My Research on the Preservice Teachers**

A number of reasons prompted me to focus my research on the preservice teachers as they worked with children at-risk. A major challenge facing teacher education today is to prepare teachers to work successfully with an increasingly diverse student population (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). However, there is a neglect of research on the preparation of teachers who will work in poor urban and rural areas (Zeichner, 2005). There is also widespread recognition that many of our nation's schools fail to meet the instructional needs of children from low-income backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Poor preparation of teachers has been cited as a factor that contributes to low academic achievement of children of poverty (Darling-Hammond; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1995).

In addition, studies show that "teachers, who are the significant adult other during the school day, unlike parents, respond to children's social class and ethnicity" (Alexander et al., 1997, p. 10). Data also indicate "teachers and their personal pedagogies have a tremendous influence on [children's] literacy and language learning" (Eckert, Turner, Alsup, & Knoeller, 2006, p. 274). Yet, the proportion of non-qualified and inexperienced teachers is greater in high poverty schools than in economically advantaged schools (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Evertson, Hawley, & Zlotnik, 1985; Haberman, 1985). Furthermore, teachers are the linchpins in educational reform efforts (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Reports point out that despite school reform movements, the academic achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children has stayed the same and may even be widening (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997; Sanchez, 2005; Silliman, Wilkinson, & Brea-Span, 2004).

I also noted that limited studies have examined what goes on in summer literacy camps. Reports are largely anecdotal, and in particular, teachers' experiences have been overlooked (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). In addition, I considered the unique community of practice mentorship model that supported the camp structure. Proposals for the redesign of teacher education call for teacher candidates to work closely with experienced mentors (Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Holmes Group, 1986). Yet, a review of the literature shows that few investigations have examined how preservice teachers gain access to professional knowledge through collaboration with more experienced peers. Critics argue that research on teacher education habitually fails to acknowledge the processes of teaching and learning as social activities (Rueda, 1998). Consequently, "teacher education remains an under theorized field of inquiry, lacking coherent conceptual frameworks that address the complexities of individuals acting in social situations" (Goos & Bennison, 2002, p. 2).

Through my research, I hoped to discover how teaching children at-risk guided by a nurturing community of experienced mentors might impact the preservice teachers' professional development. I also wanted to learn how interactions with children and parents might influence the preservice teachers' growth. Ultimately, I sought to add to the

limited body of research on teacher preparation for diverse populations because I wanted to respond to calls for an overall improvement of teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Zeichner & Conlin, 2005).

### **Literatures Informing the Inquiry**

My inquiry was informed by tenets of sociocultural theories (Rogoff, 1990, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Few studies have applied sociocultural theories to preservice teacher education (Goos & Bennison, 2002). Yet, these perspectives have the potential to illuminate how future teachers might gain access to professional knowledge through participation in personal, interpersonal, and shared community activities (Goos & Bennison; Lerman, 2001; Pressick-Kilborn & Walker, 2004).

From a sociocultural standpoint, development is achieved within a master-apprenticeship framework (Hickey & McCaslin, 2001). Drawing heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1978), sociocultural theorists contend that language is a critical interface between learners and competent mentors because language helps to frame problems, and facilitates and clarifies meaning (Rogoff, 1997). In addition, sociocultural perspectives consider learning as a socially inspired process in which novices and skilled mentors work together in the pursuit of shared issues and concerns (Goos & Bennison, 2002; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

This is not to say that sociocultural perspectives discount the importance of the individual in the learning process. Individual development is paramount to sociocultural principles (Piaget, 1990; Vygotsky). However, while sociocultural scholars acknowledge the individual, the personal is always grounded in the collective social (Bakhtin, 1986; Mead, 1962; Vygotsky; Wertsch, 1991). "Knowledge is constructed by learners themselves under a variety of social constraints" (Hatano, 1993, p. 155). In other words, personal interpretive points of view are "a consolidation of many perspectives and voices or genres of others we have known" (Stahl, 2000, p. 70).

Adhering to sociocultural points of view, I sought to answer the following four questions in the inquiry.

1. In what ways did the preservice teachers' participation as tutors transform their professional development?
2. In what ways did the preservice teachers' interpersonal interactions with parents and graduate student mentors impact their professional development?
3. In what ways did the preservice teachers' participation in a mutual learning community enhance their professional development?
4. How did the graduate student mentors perceive the preservice teachers' professional development?

### **Data Sources Informing the Inquiry**

At the end of the semester, with the preservice teachers' permission and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I used the preservice teachers' weekly e-mail reflections and their end-of-semester survey and focus group responses as data sources for the inquiry. In order to broaden my interpretive lens, I also included the master's and

doctoral student mentors' observation field notes, comments in our weekly meetings, e-mail exchanges with the preservice teachers, and the preservice teachers' e-mail reflections to me. I viewed these diverse sources of information as a montage of multiple voices and points of view rather than as a single text composed of a central theme. Therefore, rather than follow canons of traditional triangulation procedures that attempt to provide a unified understanding of one phenomenon, I employed postmodernist prismatic crystallization imagery appropriate for reflecting multiple perspectives (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

### **Data Analysis through a Sociocultural Framework**

Sociocultural perspectives "regard individual development as inseparable from interpersonal and community processes" (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995, p. 45). However, Rogoff (1995, 1997) contends that it is possible to foreground singular aspects of individuals' development by focusing on three planes of analysis that she labels: (a) personal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) community. The personal plane of analysis examines individuals' transformations through their participation in a meaningful activity (Rogoff et al.). The interpersonal plane of analysis concentrates on transformations that occur through individuals' communication and interactions with others, while the community plane of analysis devotes attention to individuals' development that results through participation within a community of shared knowledge, values, and practices (Pressick-Kilborn & Walker, 2004).

Following Rogoff's (1995, 1997) notion of planes of analysis, I examined the data in four iterative phases. Specifically, I employed a prismatic lens to examine changes in the preservice teachers' professional development, constructed through their: (a) participation as tutors, (b) communicative interfaces with parents and mentors, and (c) connections with the common values and practices of the summer literacy camp. Additionally, I examined a fifth phase where: (d) I studied the data collected from the master's and doctoral student mentors to ascertain their perceptions of the preservice teachers' experiences and professional growth.

To begin my examination, I collated the data in chronological order because I wanted to examine possible transformations in the preservice teachers' thinking and pedagogy over time. Next, I employed content analysis techniques that enabled me to sift through large volumes of data systematically to locate and code relevant information (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). I read, reread, and underlined words, sentences, and longer discourse that appeared relevant to the inquiry. For example, I identified individual preservice teachers' statements such as, "I learned that I need to focus on children's abilities rather than their economic status" and "We all improved in our teaching abilities. The mentors were awesome." In addition, I documented the graduate student mentors' responses such as, "These preservice teachers know less than they think they do, but they have promise" and "Oh, these preservice teachers are entirely different people now."

Then, adhering to sociocultural positions that consider the personal, the interpersonal, and the community as three "inseparable, mutually constituting planes" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 139), I scrutinized the data for distinct triadic, but always equally interrelated units of examination that I labeled: (a) The preservice teachers and the personal; (b) The preservice teachers and the interpersonal, and (c) The preservice



teachers and the community. Specifically, I identified and categorized language that portrayed references to self (the personal), others (the interpersonal), and camp experiences (the community). Although I focused on each of these units of analysis separately, I was always aware that none of these three dimensions, or planes, exist independently (Rogoff, 1995). Similar to peering through a multi-faceted crystal, this data organizational scheme allowed me to understand dimensions of the preservice teachers' development that I might have overlooked through single foci analyses.

### **The Preservice Teachers and the Personal**

In the following section I concentrate on transformations in the preservice teachers' professional development as an outcome of their work with children at-risk. My perusal of the data illuminated five transformative areas that I attributed to the preservice teachers' participation as tutors. They (a) overcame their initial doubts and fears about teaching, (b) developed empathy for children at-risk, (c) came to recognize the importance of thoroughly preparing lessons, (d) learned how to supervise groups of students and became skillful in time management, and (e) developed self-identities as teachers. I make these data visible in the following section.

#### **Overcoming Initial Doubts and Fears**

Initially, all of the preservice teachers were anxious about tutoring. Following the preservice teachers' first teaching session the graduate student mentors' observation notes included entries such as,

The preservice teachers are nervous because they don't know what to expect. They seem panicked. We will have to work closely with them. They're so worried about being wrong. I tried to alleviate their fears tonight. "This is a learning experience," I kept saying to them. "You can't know everything at the beginning of a course." They have this scared look in front of the kids. They have worries about the reading assessments so we went over that – also lesson plans. I met with all of my preservice teachers to get their thoughts. One of them was shocked that the fourth grade student could read the graded sight words on the assessment up to Grade Level Nine, but could only comprehend the passages up to Grade Level Two.

I sensed the preservice teachers' anxiety because they are unsure about what they are getting into. I think some have never taught small groups of children, let alone children at-risk. We are here to help them achieve success and we need to let them know we are helpers –not critics. It is interesting to note that just like brand new teachers at my school, the preservice teachers are interested in procedural/survival things, like what to do first, second, and third, rather than meeting children's instructional needs. As for the dialogue journals, two preservice teachers were upset

because their children could not write back to them. I told them it was ok for the kids to draw a response.

They have never administered reading assessments before and that's one thing that's making them nervous. Some have not practiced administering this type of assessment and a few even walked in tonight with the shrink wrap still wrapped around their assessment book! They never looked at it, or viewed the CD that comes with it. I'll e-mail my group tonight and arrange an information session with them about how to use commercial assessments. They were also FREAKING out about the required murals, but we'll temper their fears.

The preservice teachers' e-mail narratives and end-of semester focus group comments confirmed their early stage doubts and fears, and their later development of confidence.

Oh, I was overwhelmed the first night. On the way home I called my best friend and said I was dropping the course because I had to teach, and the children were at-risk for academic failure. But I stuck with it. The class did not get easier, but it was the most beneficial class I have taken.

I had big headache on the first night of the camp. I wondered, "Will I be observed as I teach?" I was confused about who I would teach, but I overcame my confusions about teaching. Now I have all of this confidence. I learned while I was learning and didn't realize this. Does that make sense?

I was so overwhelmed and frightened those first few nights about teaching these kids, and I wanted to drop the class. But, I stuck it out and it became a wonderful experience for me. I underestimated my ability to get things done.

I did not know if the camp would work and if I could learn all I needed to know about teaching. Now I know I did learn what I needed to know. I was terrified in the beginning, but it all worked out. I did it.

I have to admit on the first day I thought this was never going to work. I discovered that I could overcome my doubts about my teaching abilities. I was totally confused at first but my confusion went away. I was scared to teach at the beginning, but I got over it.

### **Developing Empathy for Children At-Risk**

By the third tutoring session, the graduate students noticed that the preservice teachers were more relaxed and eager to work with the children. One graduate student mentor wrote in her observation notes, "I like the way the preservice teachers have settled

in with their children. They see that in the long run, most children are similar – they want to learn and please – they are full of questions and delight.”

Another commented, “I can hardly wait for Monday evenings to arrive. Each week the preservice teachers get more responsive to their children’s needs.”

By mid-semester the preservice teachers’ e-mail reflections resonated with their positive views about teaching children at-risk.

I learned about these children and I am now very comfortable teaching them. They all have talents and special aptitudes. I was very nervous the first few weeks because you never know what these children are going to be like. But, I found out my kids were great kids.

Whew! This isn’t so bad. I learned to learn from children--their behavior--their learning styles--their abilities. My fears of teaching children at-risk have left. I am definitely feeling more comfortable because I learn more and more about these children.

I discovered that every child is different and I need to meet every child’s needs. I learned that the children in my group were wonderful. They even helped me if I forgot something. I actually learned from the kids in my group. I forgot that they were children at-risk for school failure.

I was apprehensive, but I learned to focus on the children’s abilities and potential and not their at-risk status. All children are different and that’s fine. These children are just like children everywhere. I had assumptions that were not correct about these kids.

I learned that some kids can’t read or write. I am still trying to figure out all of the reasons this might be so. And, not every child is on the same reading and writing level. Some are nowhere near the level they should be. But, that doesn’t mean it is just because of poverty. There are many reasons that children need individualized instruction. That’s ok.

“You have to make sure you help children who are struggling. You have to give them extra instructional time and respect. You would be amazed at all the learning that is taking place with these kids.”

### **Recognizing the Importance of Preparing Lessons**

Despite weekly reminders about the importance and benefits of careful lesson planning, the graduate students’ e-mail notes indicated that the preservice teachers’ experienced considerable difficulties at the beginning of the semester because they did not take sufficient time to make detailed preparations for instruction. Two of the graduate student mentors noted,

I did not observe adequate pre-during-and post reading strategies offered by the preservice teachers. They think they know how to plan and prepare lessons, but they don't. Wait until they get in a real classroom. We mentors need to interact more with the preservice teachers. I love mentoring them.

I am a little disappointed that the preservice teachers are not asking us for help with lesson planning and instructional delivery. There is one preservice teacher though, who e-mails me all the time for assistance. I have to work hard to get all of them to feel free to ask for help.

As the semester progressed, the graduate student mentors noticed big improvements in the preservice teachers' recognition of the importance of thoroughly preparing lessons. For example, during the fifth week of camp one mentor observed,

They are meeting the criteria now. All have made vast improvements. I see appropriate reading strategies being used. For example, they encourage their children to predict about story characters' goals and actions. They preview the story and make notes about where to help kids predict and make inferences. They are finally writing those required lesson plans. Another thing is that the preservice teachers are asking us questions about instruction now. They trust us more.

By the end of the semester, the preservice teachers acknowledged prior planning was one key to successful pedagogy. Some commented,

I learned that I needed to take more time to prepare lessons. I had to get it in my head that plenty of prior planning is what it takes. I needed to prepare more at the beginning of the camp.

I felt a lot of stress at the beginning of the semester because I was not as prepared as I could have been. Plenty of prior planning is the key to success. I acquired the motivation to plan and plan and plan----a behavior I did not have before tutoring these children.

"I never knew it took so much time to plan a lesson. If you are not prepared, the lesson fails. The children know you are confused."

"Well, prior planning really is the key to good teaching. I don't think I'll ever forget this fact after tutoring this summer."

### **Learning How to Supervise Groups of Children and Manage Time**

Like most neophytes, the preservice teachers initially struggled with two procedural concerns associated with effective teaching: (a) group supervision and (b)

time management (see Richards & Shea, 2006). Early in the semester, a few graduate student mentors commented in our meetings.

I believe that some of the preservice teachers in my group need support with timing. They need to consider how long students should work on a given task. They need to limit unproductive student conversations. We need to model for them.

During my walk through, I noted some off-task behaviors with some of the children that need to be addressed. The preservice teachers just ignore this behavior like it will go away. They need to learn “the teacher look.” I have to help them develop an understanding of group and time management.

“I just would like to see them move a lesson along. They spend too much time on the murals, and they allow children to talk about anything and monopolize teaching time. I will continue to model for them.”

Focus group conversations demonstrated that by the end of the camp, the preservice teachers recognized that group supervision proficiency and time management expertise were two important variables connected to effective teaching. Some noted,

I figured out how to move my children along in a lesson. I used to let them take 20 minutes for an activity that should only take 10 minutes. I found out in my prior lessons that I let the children dawdle and erase every other word as they wrote and that’s what was taking so long.

I had poor classroom management skills. I had no idea how to manage a group of children. I found out that group management expertise is crucial. I never would have learned this unless I tutored my small group of children.

I learned about adjusting to different situations that popped up during our sessions and I learned from my mistakes. I also learned not to rush through everything-to take my time. On the other hand, I also learned to speed things up if necessary.

“I learned to keep every child engaged. I used to have non-productive teaching times. I could not adjust to any small or large changes that were necessary. I would continue to plow through the lesson.”

I learned that I needed to figure out how to allot my teaching time so I didn’t finish my lessons too soon, or I didn’t run out of time. Also, organization is the key. You must be prepared for anything and always have a backup plan. Expect anything.

## Developing Self-Identities as Teachers

Scholars note that being active in a community of practice helps participants construct identities in relationship to the community. In addition, as individuals become more competent, they accept more responsibility for their own learning. They leave the periphery of the group and move to the center of the community (Smith, 2005). The preservice teachers were no exception to these two premises. By the eighth camp session, the graduate student mentors observed that the preservice teachers had developed considerable awareness and understanding about themselves as teachers. Two wrote,

Oh, these preservice teachers are entirely different people now. They share with one another and have a spirit of cooperation, confidence, and achievement. They come to us for all sorts of advice and if we don't know the answers, we find out. It feels like they are our colleagues now rather than preservice teachers with no experience.

"The preservice teachers are taking an active role now in their own development. We mentors are needed less. What interesting progress." The preservice teachers also recognized their own developing confidence and resourcefulness as professionals. They candidly explained in the end-of-semester focus group session,

Tutoring the children has forced me to look at myself as a teacher and not as, "I want to be a teacher." I now can teach children who are at-risk. I listen to them. I can keep them on task. I scaffold their learning. I pretend I'm Lev Vygotsky.

I learned to model-model-model and not ask the children so many questions. At first, I felt that I was too inexperienced to teach on my own. Most of my classes are theory-based and not teaching based. So, most of all I learned that I could do it! I learned to give the children concrete examples before I offered abstract information.

I have learned that I am a better teacher with primary children than with older children. I also learned that I am very resourceful and creative. I can plan for individual students. Modeling is another teacher behavior that I do well.

I needed to be more creative with lessons. After working with these children I learned that I really am creative – It starts with a great children's literature book as an integral part of the lesson. I learned to be flexible. Also, I learned that I had to individualize instruction.

I learned to reevaluate the way I initially taught. I thought I knew how to teach, but I had a lot to learn. One thing I recognized about mid semester was not to question the children all the time. Instead, I started to model my thinking and scaffold children's learning.

“I learned a lot about myself as a teacher. I learned from my mistakes. I learned to model, model, model and to share my thinking with my students.”

“I developed confidence. I learned that I always got so nervous and anxious about how I might teach and then, it came to me that I should just be at ease and go with the flow.”

“I learned that reading and writing are hard to teach. For example, in writing you have to think about so many conventions – spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and of course ideas!”

“I learned about myself by planning and offering literacy lessons. Imagine that?”

### **The Preservice Teachers and the Interpersonal**

“One distinguishing feature of sociocultural theory is the view that teaching and learning are social, not individual activities” (Rueda, 1998, p. 1). In this section I place the personal plane of analysis in the background and concentrate on the preservice teachers’ professional development as an outcome of their interpersonal participation. My analysis of the data illuminated transformations in the preservice teachers’ development in two areas that I credit to social interactions: (a) communication with parents and (b) communication with mentors.

#### **Communication with Parents**

Early in the program the graduate student mentors noticed that the preservice teachers had significant opportunities to converse with parents. Two mentioned this opportunity in our group meetings. “In my undergraduate courses we never get to communicate with parents. This is a wonderful learning opportunity for these preservice teachers.” “This student is a child with special needs. His mother stays at the camp sessions and it is a pleasure to see his preservice teacher talk to his mother about his language and writing problems.”

Only one preservice teacher held a negative view about communicating with a parent. She wrote, “When my parent picks up her child she shows very little interest about what we did at camp. She just acts like she wants to get out of there.”

The majority of the preservice teachers had strong positive feelings about opportunities to converse with parents. They explained this in the following quotes. “I was actually able to talk to parents in Spanish. I never had to speak with Hispanic parents before. I really learned to communicate.” “I had wonderful interactions with parents. New teachers say they never know how to talk with parents-well-I learned in the camp.” “I talked to parents before and after every session. I also called parents on the phone. I loved talking to the parents.” “Each week I gave parents a copy of our camp notes so they were able to ask questions express concerns, and know exactly what their child was doing each session.” “Every night of the camp while my students wrote in their journals I wrote to the parents explaining what we did that night and what we would do next week. I

always complimented each child.” “I got to communicate with parents and preservice teachers rarely have that opportunity.”

I tried to communicate in Spanish, but I couldn’t. But, the parents didn’t mind. They were so sweet to me and I feel they did understand me-not everything I said, but some things. Now, I’m going to take a Spanish course. I’m thinking of my future life as a teacher.

Fortunately, I am bilingual (Spanish and English) and that helped me communicate with parents and the parents could communicate with me. One parent told me, “I have never had a chance to tell a teacher about my child until I met you.” My parents had my phone number and we often talked on the phone.

These parents cared about their children and I always talked to them. They were interested in what their kids did that day. Please keep doing the camp every summer. I learned that I could communicate with parents. I communicated with parents at every camp session.

“This was my first experience talking with parents and it was wonderful. Parents were my partners.”

### **Communication with Mentors**

Understandably, during the first camp session, communication between the graduate student mentors and the preservice teachers was limited and guarded. As a graduate student mentor explained, “I need to get more comfortable with the preservice teachers. I don’t want to step on their toes, or hurt their feelings so I am cautious. Of course I don’t know my group yet and that’s one problem.”

The preservice teachers were also initially wary of the idea of graduate student mentors observing them during tutoring sessions. For example, one preservice teacher told me, “I dislike the mentors observing me when I am trying to teach. It makes me nervous.”

However, as scholars note, communities of practice models foster trust among participants (Smith, 2005), and the graduate students mentors and preservice teachers soon bonded with one another. A graduate student mentor shared this connection in our group meetings. “I’m enjoying my interactions with the preservice teachers. Most of them are eager to learn and they are not afraid to ask questions. What a mentoring opportunity. We have developed rapport.”

The preservice teachers responded similarly. For example,

Thank you mentors. You have helped me every step of the way. You gave us confidence. We learned about the job of teaching as went along, thanks to your guidance. At first I did not want anyone to observe me teaching, but I learned I could count on my mentors to help me.



I would like to thank the mentors because they boosted our confidence and that helped the children in the camp. They were always available and they endured question after question after question. I worked closely with the mentors. All were wonderful. They offered valuable insights.

I got a bit nervous when the mentor observed me the first few weeks, but she was only trying to be helpful. She settled my nerves. Thank goodness we can meet every week with our mentors because when I get confused, they clear things up right away.

My mentor was excellent. She had great ideas. All of the mentors provided unlimited support. If they did not know an answer to my question, they did their best to find out. They offered me vital information about being a great teacher. They offered constructive suggestions.

“Thank you for this opportunity to interact with experienced mentors. They worked very hard and provided help and advice for me. It was such a great chance to work with mentors who have ‘been there and done that.’” “The mentors were always there to help us no matter what and that was a huge stress relief.”

My master’s student was my special mentor and she was excellent. She always was there to help and to answer my e-mails. Another mentor- a doctoral student explained to us how to sign the students in and out and I asked her a question and I was embarrassed, but I learned that she was there to help.

“I had a special mentor. This was the longest semester I have ever had, but talking with her helped. She shared her ideas.” “The mentors were awesome. They provided an unlimited amount of knowledge. Now I want to be a mentor the next time around.” “The feedback from my mentors was helpful, and positive. The mentors were respectful and reflective. We preservice teachers had so much access to knowledge from the masters and doctoral students.” “Thank you mentors for helping me become a better teacher. I don’t think I could have done it without the mentors. What a wonderful learning environment.” “The mentors were role models. My mentors allowed me to learn and grow from my mistakes. My special mentor endured question after question from me.”

### **The Preservice Teachers and the Community**

In addition to emphasizing the importance of the personal and interpersonal with respect to individual development, sociocultural theory acknowledges learning as a function of the “context, and culture in which it occurs” (Hsiao, n.d., p. 5). In this section I foreground the community plane of analysis and include data that indicate the camp as a community of practice served as an important source of learning for the preservice teachers (see, Davydov & Markova, 1983). Note that there is less narrative data included in this section than in the Personal and Interpersonal Planes of Analysis sections. The preservice teachers wrote and verbalized less about the camp as a community. I assume

that broader camp experiences did not exert as much influence on the preservice teachers' professional development as personal and interpersonal interactions, and I plan to conduct further research regarding this phenomenon.

From the first camp session the graduate students recognized the value of the camp. One explained, "I never had this opportunity. I am learning a lot in the camp and I am an experienced teacher."

The preservice teachers' end of semester focus group conversations indicate that they, too valued camp experiences, "This was the hardest experience of my life and the best. Every one of us made this camp a success. The camp model made us all happy." "The camp taught me to model-model-model. The camp was a wonderful time in my life. I will carry the camp's experiences with me for years to come. I developed confidence in this camp." "I have grown up because of this camp and even though the camp was offered in a short amount of time, it changed me for the better."

More than anything this experience has made me a thinker and a better learner. I knew the camp would be a challenge, but, in a good way. Now I am confident that success as a teacher is possible through preparation and motivation.

"I had a wonderful time in camp. I learned so much. It is extremely beneficial to do things rather than be told how to teach. Thank you-all of you-I couldn't have done it without all of you." "I am now more self-confident thanks to the camp community model. It was terrifically challenging, but I arose to expectations." "This camp has helped prepare me to be a teacher. It was an awful lot of work but worth it."

I could have kept teaching in the camp. I learned about myself-my teaching abilities- areas in which I need to improve-this was the most beneficial experience in my entire college career. The camp made me confident as a teacher.

"I learned so much in this camp that I cannot thank everyone enough. I cannot even begin to name all the things I learned from this experience." "I became a teacher in this camp."

I'll never forget this experience. It taught me about myself and how I needed to be a better learner and thinker. I learned that teaching these children is productive. No matter how much of a failure I felt, the children always got something out of the lesson. Everyone is different and that's wonderful.

"I have grown up because of the camp." "We all improved in our teaching abilities because of this camp. I learned from this camp that I need to always know what I am doing because sometimes parents questioned me and I did not have clear answers." "The camp showed me there is no one-way to teach. Teachers need to look at individual children and teach to their needs and interests."

### **Limitations of the Inquiry**

Several limitations of the inquiry must be considered before I share my impressions of the research and offer implications for teacher education programs. I acknowledge that my assumptions cannot be generalized to other contexts. This inquiry investigated 42 preservice teachers in one K-4 Charter School, and to a great extent school contextual influences determine what preservice teachers learn (Richards, Moore, & Gipe, 1996/1997).

Researcher subjectivity is another central consideration in qualitative research (Alvermann, 2000; Noddings, 1984; Peshkin, 1983). My previous teaching experiences, my dual role as supervisor and researcher of a summer literacy camp, and my interest in sociocultural theories shaped how I identified and categorized the data following Rogoff's (1990, 1995) notions of personal, interpersonal, and community planes of analysis. Others might employ different methodology and draw different conclusions from mine. All research is an interpretive process, influenced by "personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6).

Throughout the inquiry I was also mindful of feminist perspectives and cautions regarding the transactional nature of qualitative research. There are presumptions, challenges, and limitations attached to describing others' beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors (Behar, 1993; Fontana & Frey, 2005).

A further concern is "the potential limitations of self-reported data" (Shavelson, Webb, & Burnstein, 1986, p. 44). The inquiry depended on the preservice teachers' willingness to write and talk about their experiences, and to reveal their perceptions. In addition, the study depended on the graduate student mentors' abilities and motivation to discern and describe the preservice teachers' thinking and behavior.

### **My Impressions of the Research and Implications for Teacher Education**

Few studies have applied sociocultural theories to preservice teacher education (Goos & Bennison, 2002). The research reported here employs a unique and useful data collection method to capture transformations in preservice teachers' development through meaningful interactions and shared experiences with others. The broad, sociocultural prismatic lens undergirding the inquiry highlights three distinct, yet mutually embedded participatory influences on preservice teachers' professional growth (the personal, the interpersonal, and the community) that I might have overlooked using traditional single foci analysis. Thus, the inquiry contrasts with more traditional approaches to studying preservice teachers, and offers an increased understanding of the complexity of learning to teach.

The study places the preservice teachers directly in the center of the learning process. "It is the individual who ultimately constructs an understanding of what was experienced" (Matthews & Cobb, 2006, p. 330). At the same time, the research focuses attention on preservice teachers' growth as an outcome of participation, and emphasizes that learning is "situated and nourished by interactions with others" (Matthews & Cobb, p. 325). For many years, scholars have noted that learning is socially stimulated

(Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985, 1991). “What we learn is defined by those with whom we are able to share and build that learning” (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006, p. 648).

The inquiry also assigns importance to the contextual dimensions in which learning takes place. A dominant premise of sociocultural perspectives is that “teaching and learning must be contextualized or situated in meaningful activities connected to everyday life” (Rueda, 1998, p. 2). However, sociocultural views broaden conceptualizations of context beyond physical environments to encompass aspects of the social world that include access to expertise, and opportunities for collaboration, conversations, and joint authentic problem-solving activities among individuals and groups (Pressick-Kilborn & Walker, 2004; Rueda; Whipp, Eckman, & van den Kieboom, 2005).

In addition, the study draws attention to the benefits of community of practice models. As Grisham and Wolsey (2006) note, “community is the soul of learning” (p. 648). Such communities are in themselves “contexts for learning and development” (Pressick-Kilborn & Walker, 2004, p. 2). Enculturation into a community of practice provides opportunities for individuals to share knowledge and endeavors, accept responsibility for one’s actions, learn to trust one another, and assist all members regardless of experience, expertise, or roles.

The inquiry has direct implications for teacher education. Clearly, the community of practice model described in the study served to transform the preservice teachers’ development in positive ways. In fact, I was surprised to discover how strong an influence the community of practice model had on the preservice teachers’ professional development. I learned that given the right environment preservice teachers are capable of discovering important truths about themselves as teachers and about teaching. I also learned that participation is both personal and social. “It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations” (Wenger, 2006, p. 56). In other words, knowledge and understanding do not emerge through solitary, non-participatory activities. Instead, knowledge and understanding are social phenomena shaped by participation in the contexts in which they develop (Turner, 2001; Wenger, 1998). With this in mind, teacher education programs might wish to examine their current philosophy about teaching and learning. As this inquiry indicates, preservice teachers’ development results not from faculty-driven discourse, but from their participation in a social environment that provides rich opportunities to solve real-life problems and occasions to “use the world around them as a learning resource” (Wenger, 1998, p. 275).

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## **Appendix A**

### **End-of-Semester Survey**

Dear Preservice Teachers,

We want to know about your experiences in the Summer Literacy camp. We will use your responses to help structure future camp activities. You have already signed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent form that indicates your willingness to participate in this research project. However, your participation in this survey is voluntary. It will NOT affect your final grade if you chose to not complete the survey. Thank you for your help.

**Please use the back of this form to write your responses to the following questions.**

1. As a tutor in the Summer Literacy Camp how did you communicate with parents?
2. As a tutor in the Summer Literacy Camp what did you learn about your self as a teacher?
3. How have your views changed since the beginning of the camp?
4. What do you want to say about the children in the camp?
5. What do you want to say about the graduate student mentors?
6. What else do you want to say about the camp, the graduate student mentors, the children who attended the camp, and your experiences as a tutor in the camp?

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